

Blue Raiders end historic season against Minnesota in NIT quarterfinal

MT finishes 27-7, most wins in program history

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn.

(AP)- Marcos Knight neared a double-double with 19 points, matching his career-high, and nine rebounds for Middle Tennessee, but the Blue Raiders' late rally fell short to the Minnesota Golden Gophers in a 78-72 defeat in the quarterfinals of the NIT on Wednesday night at Murphy Center in front of a season-high crowd of 10,521 fans. MT closes its historic season with a 27-7 overall record.

Raymond Cintron and LaRon Dendy also added double-figures for the Blue Raiders, scoring 15 and 11, respectively.

Andre Hollins and Rodney Williams each scored 24 to lead the way for Minnesota (22-14). Elliott Eliason added 12 points and seven rebounds for Minnesota, while Hollins also chipped in six rebounds and four assists.

Minnesota will face Pac-12 regular-season champion Washington at Madison Square Garden on Tuesday. It will mark the Gophers' first appearance in the NIT semis since 2003.



Minnesota, which also won road games over La Salle and Miami in the tournament, handed MT only

its second home loss of the season. The Blue Raiders had won 13 in a row at the Murphy Center since an 87-84 loss in double-overtime to Belmont on Nov. 20.

The Blue Raiders narrowed the game to one possession in the final minute, but Minnesota converted 11 of 12 free throws, including its last eight in a row.

Williams, who scored Minnesota's first eight points, finished 8-of-11 from the field and 6-of-8 from the free throw line.

In a game featuring nine lead changes through the first 26 minutes, Minnesota took charge midway through the second half. The Gophers broke a stalemate by taking a 46-43 lead on an Austin Hollins 3-pointer with 13:55 remaining.

Minnesota led the rest of the way but struggled to put MT away in the final minutes. In the final 28.6 seconds, MT narrowed the lead to three twice and two once, but the Gophers made all eight free throws in that span to hold on. [Postgame Quotes](#)

Head coach Kermit Davis

Opening statement

"I'd like to comment on the atmosphere tonight. On a one day turnaround, to have a crowd over 10,500 is just a great compliment to our fans and our students. Chris (Massaro) and his staff did a wonderful job getting the word out. It was as good an environment as you can get in college basketball."

"I thought our team played well, but we lost on the things that have won us games. They beat us on second chance points, they outscored us 17-4 off turnovers, and I think they probably beat us on 50/50 balls. We made a great comeback there at the end, and it's a tough way to end it. I thought it was just a hard-fought, physical basketball game."

On thinking how tonight's game will be remembered

"I thought we could have won it if we got to New York. Like Minnesota, Minnesota can definitely win it. We didn't talk about it much to the team, but I sure thought about it. I thought we had a chance at halftime when we were up four even though we hadn't played great. We're a really, really good second half team."

"Tonight we lost, but it's still a great memory. I'm telling you, for a school at our level, not many schools can do that. Look around at the NIT crowds. We had 10,521 on a day turnaround. That shows the capability of what we can do here, and that separates us from a lot of programs around our area and around the country, and we can build from that."

On seniors LaRon Dendy and Jimmy Oden

"LaRon Dendy brought our program a long way, I promise you that. In one year, it was unbelievable what he did. I thanked him for it in the locker room. He's one of the most enjoyable guys I've ever had to coach. His charisma, his personality away from basketball can't be replaced. He's going to do great things in his career in basketball, I promise you that, and he gets his degree in May."

"I have great memories of LaRon Dendy and how much he's progressed since he got here. He's always been a good person and a great guy, we had nothing off the floor with him. I saw his maturation as a leader, and that was fun. Jimmy Oden was great, and I thought he played his best basketball in the last month of the year. He was just terrific, and we'll miss both of those guys."

On looking back on the season

"My best memory was how fun it was to come to the gym every day. They weren't perfect every time, but they had great energy. They were fun to be around. They were fun to travel with, and they're great guys. It's not just that we won 27 games, but it was the day-to-day with those guys."

"When we came back from the UCLA game, the fans really latched on to this team. Even for the Greensboro game, it was a little under 5,600. In both the Belmont games, the attendance was terrific. Over our last three conference games, we averaged about 7,100. They were coming to see us play. They enjoyed having Minnesota here, but these fans were coming to see their guys play. They like their team. I think it'll build, and we'll have some record-breaking crowds next year."

"We beat UCLA, Ole Miss and Tennessee. I mean, that's a lot of BCS schools. These guys have a lot to be proud of."

On moving forward next year

"I think we all strive to have high expectations. We have nine out of 11 back. We had a good signee early, and we're working recruiting now. We have a great schedule next year. We have Ole Miss at home, UAB at home, Vanderbilt at Bridgestone. So, it's going to be another really difficult non-conference schedule, but it's going to be great for our fans."

Junior guard Marcos Knight

On the loss

"They got a lot of second-chance points off of offensive rebounds as well as 50/50 balls. They were the tougher team in the gym today. We just didn't get a lot of second chances like they did. We turned the ball over way too much, and they got 17 points off of our turnovers."

On moving forward to next year

"This gives us a lot of experience. LaRon and Jimmy were great seniors, and they gave us a lot of leadership. I feel like I have to take LaRon's spot next year. I have to be a leader like he was, come to practice every day with high energy, and work hard the whole summer. We look forward to next year."

Senior forward LaRon Dendy

On what he will remember about tonight

"The fans came out and they showed a lot of love towards us. There were a lot of people here, and that's something down the line that's going to stay in my memory bank."

"It was frustrating, but I'm not going to think about today, I'm going to think about this whole year being great. Coach Davis brought me a long way as a player and as a person."

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